

Remarks (as prepared) by LTC Alayne Conway, US Army
Public Affairs Qualification Course-Advanced Distributed Learning-Resident
Graduation Ceremony on 26 Jul 13

Good afternoon and thanks to my good friend Russ for that kind introduction. COL Martin, DINFOS faculty, family members and most importantly, graduates of PAQC Class 10-13, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today. I was honored when Russ asked me to speak at your graduation. It seems like yesterday that I was sitting in your seat contemplating the future but confident in the communication skills I gained from DINFOS.

Russ provided me an excellent overview of your class and your intense curriculum over the last 28 weeks... I am impressed with what you have accomplished – the fundamentals of journalism, Communication planning, how to conduct print interviews, responding to media queries...all culminating in a two day Operational Support Exercise focused on the Pacific -- even more impressive is that you accomplished most of your instruction through a distance learning program.

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I was then further impressed when he shared with me some of your civilian job titles...HS journalism teacher, 3D architectural artist, Associate professor of communication studies....wow, the public affairs career field is very lucky to be gaining such talent. I was a little surprised that you don't have representation from the Marines or Coast Guard so I coordinated with your faculty to have you sing the Marines' Hymn and the Coast Guard song – before you depart the building today.

I know you all are experts on speech writing and delivery, and well versed in the DINFOS method of introducing three topics when you present a speech so in that vein, I have three points I want to make today....first, I will address changes in the information environment...second, I will review some of the challenges facing our military...and third, I will offer some keys for success.

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I may not have all the answers but I believe I have been truly blessed with my career and I hope to share some of my experiences and some personal tips that may help you in future endeavors.

I have spent the last 13 years serving in a variety of public affairs assignments stateside and abroad. I have deployed to both peacekeeping and wartime theaters and served in staffs at the tactical through strategic level. As my biography indicates, I recently graduated from the U.S. Army War College where I spent 10 months studying strategic issues and preparing myself for future assignments as a senior PAO. Many of my superiors and peers told me to avoid the Pentagon but I am assigned there again and ready for the many challenges and long days that lie ahead.

You might think I am unlucky to have back to back tours at the Pentagon, but I feel I am a better PAO because of the many experiences afforded to me. More importantly, I've had the chance to work with many of DOD's senior leaders...communicators as well as operators...who have pushed me to be an even better PAO.

First Point – Information Environment

So, let me touch upon the first point and talk about the information environment you will face...I am certain many of you are familiar with the complexity of this environment – there are multiple audiences you must engage, Congressional and political pressures, budget constraints, service cultures and in some cases service rivalries to overcome.

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As many of you have witnessed, the last twenty years have brought tremendous change to the information environment. Think back to 1990 during Desert Shield/Desert Storm – there was one 24/7 news outlet (CNN) and none in the Middle East; there were less than 10 internet sites. Fast forward to 2012...there are hundreds of 24/7 outlets throughout the west and Middle East and COUNTLESS internet sites. I am certain many of you invest a considerable amount of time using social media...the Arab Spring grew through social media....Pinterest is now the fastest growing social media outlet. There are more social media resources than I can keep up with...America is known for baby boomers, Generation Xer's and our latest generation is called "Digital natives."

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Media and technology are accessible to everyone and everywhere....we have no ability to compartmentalize information...as many of you have seen and experienced, news hits worldwide audiences simultaneously.

As you probably know from personal experiences and your education, the evolution of the information environment will continue to place greater demands on our military, and social media platforms will increasingly become a conduit of information. Our adversaries will also leverage similar platforms to support the achievement of their objectives. The rapid flow of information in this environment will mean PAOs will have a limited amount of time to accomplish their mission.

Much will be expected of you as you rejoin your organizations in the coming days and/or weeks. You are now DINFOS trained killers with a better understanding of the environment and you will be expected to put your skills to good use.

Second point – Challenges for the military

Now let's transition to some of the current issues facing our military...Although I am familiar with Army issues, many of my service issues are shared by the joint community and no doubt you are familiar with these issues too....budget and resource constraints; sexual assault/sexual harassment within the ranks; suicide prevention; and accountability, misconduct and discipline to name a few. These issues are defining our narrative so we must continue to engage and put these issues into context... you must anchor yourself to that important mission!

George Little, the Pentagon's Chief spokesman, addressed the Defense Media Activity community yesterday and charged PA practitioners to adapt a new approach to public affairs...he said that in the face of new challenges, we must push ourselves to be even better, both in our individual skills and in collaborating as a community.

Third Point - Now that I have given you my perspective on how the information environment has changed and some of the challenges PAOs are facing, let me offer some keys to success that you might find helpful.

I have tried to find a balance in my career and have focused on the Conway triad – Keeping the boss happy, Personal Development, and Networking.

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The first and foremost priority for your job should be keeping the boss happy and delivering whatever he/she needs. The PAO is an intricate part of the staff, special staff to be specific...just like the chaplain and lawyer. If you don't have "open door" access with your commander, work to get it. Many of the bosses I have served with always take their PAO and lawyer with them when they travel. That just speaks to the impact our career field has made upon the military. I personally feel we have a greater respect not only with our commanders but also among military men and women, their families, civilians and the communities we serve. We must work to maintain that trust and confidence.

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I love starting a new PA job because it gives me time to reflect on previous assignments and then consciously lay out a plan for my new boss. You can also use this technique when you are transitioning between bosses – one of my tactics is recommending an engagement plan for your boss's first 90-days on the job – this should include public and media engagements. I lay out some general points for the boss, i.e. your exposure to the public should be slow and measured...I have worked with leaders where it was important to set the stage early in their tenure but not over-commit or over-saturate the media space....in these cases, we focused on engagements with the internal audience. I then try to lay out some potential media engagements – using the example of my plan for the Army's Chief of Staff, I recommended he conduct a pre-set profile piece with a reporter that he trusted and reached the desired target.

Finally, I always ask for guidance – how does he/she want me to handle media requests for interviews or what is his/her expectation concerning web presence. Mr. Little had another great sound bite yesterday in stating that PAOs are helping DoD's leadership navigate a complex media landscape and an equally complex set of issues surrounding national security. My bottom line for you is that its better you think of these points before your boss asks you.

Another tactic for me has been the creation of a running list of public affairs “commandments” or rules that you recommend your boss live by – you can even share this with the staff. I first learned of this technique from an old boss, Rear Admiral John Kirby, who is now the CHINFO. Your list will mature with time but one of my favorite “commandments” came from him - “Thou shalt act as if you were at grandmother's table”: in other words, if you wouldn't say it or do it in front of her, don't do it or say it at all. You are a public figure and always “on.”

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The second aspect of my triad is Personal development – it seems easy enough to invest the time into bettering yourself but this may be difficult depending on your assignment or duty location...you need to make the time and do it. This includes formal education offered by the military but you should also seek out venues to improve your self-awareness or at least invest some time for reflection...I am a big fan of journaling and have some pretty in-depth writings from my deployments. My goal is to write a personal monograph that I can share with the field. I also took a public speaking class at the War College to better my skills as a communicator.

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Networking is the final piece of my triad...I feel it's important to build relationships within the career field along with colleagues in other branches, services and governmental agencies. I stay in contact with members of my career field through professional forums, blog sites, email distribution, and various groups. You made some powerful connections with your classmates through your 28 week journey so make an effort to keep in touch with each other after graduation. I also try to build these strong relationships with civilian leaders in my surrounding communities and media that service those communities. Obviously the DC area has a much different flavor than some of the areas you may work in but every relationship is important, especially when crises knock at your door.

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An aspect of “networking” is the art of mentoring...as a CPT, I sought out a small group of mentors that I remain close with today...you might even say those senior officers sought me out. Now as a senior PAO, I try to find every opportunity to offer assistance and coaching to younger PAOs. Your development is crucial to long-term effectiveness and the vitality of our career field. If you have not found at least one mentor, I urge you to seek out those influential people in your lives. It doesn't have to be a PAO but should be someone who you can have a candid conversation with and who can offer assistance and feedback as you progress along your prescribed career path.

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As you move up through the ranks, be it on the military or civilian side, I also urge you to look out for those PAOs that will come after you and offer assistance where you can...those personal interactions are the most powerful but just writing a professional article capturing lessons learned from an exercise or deployment or crisis within your organization is helpful for our career field.

I have covered a lot in my remarks and I appreciate your attentiveness this afternoon. I thought it was important to offer some perspective on the information environment and the challenges facing our military as you return to an old job or transition to a new one. I am returning to Pentagon after a one-year academic reprieve and the issues are harder to solve. I'd ask you to improve your understanding of the complex and very dynamic information environment facing the military today, and join in and inform the conversations that people are engaging in.

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Keep in mind that the fiscal environment at your installation & unit will influence your mission. There could be less unit training to cover. There could be less money for outreach events. You will have to be as efficient as ever in public affairs.

At the end of the day, our servicemembers deserve to have their stories told and you are the driving force for that important mission. Thank you and good luck in your endeavors!